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AUTHOR	Wentroth, Mary Ann
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ABSTRACT

Because of the low density of its population and subsequent low property tax support, library service in Oklahoma is based on the multicounty library operating as a single unit. With the help of federal funds, such units now cover one-third of the state and 60 percent of its population utilizing branch libraries and bookmobile service. Service to children has a high priority. The Oklahoma Department of Libraries conducts workshops on all aspects of children's services and undertakes those services which can be done most efficiently on a large scale or a comparative basis. A good example is the Children's Statewide Summer Program in which system and nonsystem libraries of all sizes participate. The Department of Libraries also works to establish juvenile collection standards, to provide interlibrary loan service to children as well as adults, and to stimulate local libraries through the distribution of exhibits and 16mm films. (SL)

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PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE TO CHILDREN IN OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma is a beautiful state covering 69,919 square miles (174,797 square kilometers), 30% in farm lands, 42% in pasture lands, and 21% in forests. In this area there are a few more than 2,500,000 people, 641,000 of them children under 14 years of age.

There are two cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants. Two more fall between 50,000 and 100,000 and the next six in size are between 50,000 and 25,000.

The density of population averages about 37 people per square mile, or 15 per square kilometer. For purposes of comparison it may help you to think of Finland, Liberia, or Rhodesia with density of 14, and Iran or Sweden averaging 18 people per square kilo. Czechoslovakia, smaller than Oklahoma by 400,000 square kilos, has a population density of 113 compared to our 15. So the picture emerges of a largely rural Oklahoma with a few progressive metropolitan areas of moderate size.

When we come to consider public library service to the children of an area, we find we must see it as part of the larger picture of library service to the entire population. And, since public libraries in the USA generally derive their financial support from property taxes, we need to take a brief look at this source of income in Oklahoma to understand the kind of library systems that are developing there.

by Mary Ann Wentroth
Public Library Consultant
for Children's Services
Oklahoma Department of Libraries

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Because of the scattered population it is customary to use the county, or a group of related counties, as the geographical and governmental unit for statewide planning. So in considering financial resources for libraries, you need to know that in our state the people in a county may tax themselves up to 2 mills per thousand dollars of assessed valuation for the support of public libraries. This means that a county having an assessed valuation of $890,747,967 can raise $1,781,495 to support its library for a year. This sounds like a great deal of money until it is pointed out that it amounts to spending $3.38 for each person in that county for books, films, building maintenance, professional and clerical salaries, and so on for a year's library services.

If that seems inadequate, consider that there are only two counties in the state that have anything like this much money to spend. Seventy-three counties have less than $100,000,000 property valuation each, which means less than 200,000 possible dollars per county for libraries.

Take for example Adair County, population 15,000 assessed valuation $8,570,000. They could realize $17,000 to support library service for the year 1973. But they have joined with contiguous counties to form a system and by pooling their money they are able to enjoy something more nearly approaching adequate library service. Certainly something better than they have ever known before.

For the past several years the state legislature has included small amounts in the Oklahoma Department of Libraries' budget for grants-in-aid to systems which find even a 2-mill assessment inadequate to support libraries. It is to be hoped that this trend can be continued and expanded.

An Oklahoma multi-county library operates as a single organization, not as a federation of independent institutions. There is one director who supervises and administers the operation of the headquarters, the branches, and the bookmobiles. Encouraged and implemented by Federal Funds during the past 16 years, it has been possible to establish six multi-county systems plus two single county systems, covering 29 counties or slightly more than one third of the geographical area of the state and 60% of the population (see attached map). Our largest system at present covers six counties, serving 131,620 people spread over 6,718 square miles (16,795 square kilometers).

In areas where the population is too dispersed to support a traditional branch library, yet within the service area of a system, a large self-contained bookmobile brings books and services to the crossroads. What such service can mean is expressed in the following letter from a boy who lives just outside the area served by one of the large systems:

> Dear Sirs:
>
> I must write you and express my good feeling toward the bookmobile and the Choctaw Nation Multi-county Library. i find being a school dropout like myself getting books to

read would have been hard to do. But the bookmobile stopped my worry almost that is. to put it in plain words, we need you in McCurtain County very much. the reasons are following: 1. we need you so i wouldn't have to hitchhike about 15 miles there and 15 back.

Sept.3 i went to Octavia to stay with a friend and got in trouble with his dad because i had to stay alnight every time i wanted to see the bookmobile so i was going to sleep on the store porch till the next morning when the bookmobile came. However i cannot stay all night with them anymore so i will have to get up early in the morning and try to make it to the bookmobile in Octavia, and chances are i won't make it before it leaves. i need a solution badly.

Reoson no.2. 4 days ago i talked to 2 boys about while they looked over my books i had checked out of the bookmobile. they showed great interest in it. They wanted me to get some books for them but i forgot to in my hurry. today Sept.6th i received 2 books from the mail unexpectedly from the library. they were book i had asked for on the bookmobile. now i can prove to people that you are for the good of us.

the postmaster and i were talking about the bookmobile. he said they had up to date history books that he would like to have. he asked me how much was the payment. he was startled when i told him none at all. i am going to get all of the people interest in the bookmobile to sign it. i will enclose it in this letter. i am 16 years old but i hope age makes no difference. i have 9 books in my possession from the book mobile. i will close for now.

Sincerely yours,
JIMMY

P.S. if this is not enough names i can get more.

The headquarters staff of librarians includes specialists who have training and skills to assist the smaller branches in planning and carrying out their services. Branch librarians do not as a rule have library degrees. They usually have

liberal arts backgrounds, sometimes including a few hours of library science. There is a continuing in-service training program and opportunities for these individuals to participate in overall planning for the system. Branch staff people are recruited from the community in which they serve, so they are sensitive to its needs and reflect its culture and its philosophy. Books, materials and supplies are centrally purchased and processed for greatest efficiency and economy. Exhibits and programs are planned and coordinated for use throughout a system.

Service to the children has high priority in all of the systems. The small communities are often aware of the importance and the need for this field of service before they recognize a library's other potentials for usefulness. Administrators always see this as an area rich in possibilities for publicity. Teachers in both public and private schools are eager to encourage children to take advantage of the added opportunities for enrichment.

Good library service to children begins with a trained and dedicated staff. And so the State Consultant for Children's Services works both directly and indirectly to encourage imaginative, forward-looking opportunities for growth as well as the solid foundation of traditional training and services.

In the early days of a system's emergence we at the Oklahoma Department of Libraries work with the staff to develop a good basic collection of books and

other materials. If mention of this seems too elementary, too obvious, it should be pointed out that many small communities have had very limited experience with the selection or use of high quality juvenile books. Many of them are not aware at all of the other materials such as recordings, film strips, pictures, educational toys and games which are now recognized as important elements in a library collection.

We conduct workshops for the systems staff in areas of responsibility such as "Maintaining the Juvenile Collection," "Book Selection," "Reference Service," "Preschool Programing" and "Storytelling." We give help as needed and requested in planning the physical arrangement of the children's area, recommending equipment and space needs. The Department of Libraries tries to make its broad experience and resources available in meeting recognized needs.

We also undertake some services which can be done most efficiently on a large scale or a cooperative basis. A good example of this is the Children's Statewide Summer Program, making plans and materials available to all libraries with little or no expenditure of their time and money. It provides program planning ideas which may be carried out as simply or as elaborately as the library wishes. It may conserve time and energy of a small, or overworked, or unimaginative staff. On the other hand, it may give a dedicated, creative librarian a running start for a really inspired program. For some librarians it has introduced and then confirmed the philosophy that a program's

success is not built on "quantity reading." We have come to recognize that the reading or participation in the summer program is its own reward, and the child who wants or is able to read only a few books may well benefit more than the one who might receive recognition for having read a great number of books.

One of the unanticipated values from this summer program has been the provision of a common project, shared by many sizes and kinds of communities throughout the state. Here is an enterprise that has been entered into by people from the bookmobile stop to the urban headquarters library or a busy neighborhood branch facility. Not only the libraries, but the people themselves in all parts of the state have this library experience in common.

All county and multi-county library systems participate as well as many of the small non-system libraries scattered over the state. Each location develops a program reflecting its own local talents and tastes so none are the same, but ideas flow from one to another and generate enthusiasm.

The 1974 theme has been CIRCUS CIRCUS which provides almost endless possibilities for expansion. Free materials provided participating libraries included a Librarian's Manual, offering detailed suggestions and resources; bright posters in two sizes; rubber stamps featuring a handsome lion's head; book marks; folders in which children may record their reading and collect

"hand-outs;" the "hand-outs" themselves which consist of a variety of puzzles, jokes, games, and handicraft ideas. The State Consultant for Children's Services not only originates these materials, but is available to participating libraries for implementation planning.

We spoke earlier of this consultant's availability for aid in juvenile book selection. We should tell you also about another service which reinforces our ability to help small communities or those having no ready access to large wholesale or retail outlets.

At the Department of Libraries we maintain a Juvenile Review Collection containing most of the currently published children's books, supplemented by a file of reviews and evaluations from most of the recognized sources. We are building a Juvenile Evaluation Collection consisting of older recommended titles which have become "standard." These items, along with the commonly recognized bibliographic tools will make a Center where anyone may come to make intelligent comparisons and decisions for book selection and acquisition, compile bibliographies, study the wide range of children's books, etc. It should be useful to adults working with children and children's books from all areas of the state and because of the state capital's central location, it should be reasonably accessible to all citizens.

The publication of a bi-monthly list of "Juvenile Books Worthy of Consideration for Purchase" has been discontinued because of lack of funds for clerical assistance. It was based on materials in the collection mentioned above and had proved to be a useful item for many small-town librarians which had no access to other reviewing media. It is to be hoped that the Oklahoma Department of Libraries will soon be able to resume this function.

There is another statewide activity which, while not unique to Oklahoma, is uncommon enough to note with pride. The teletype interlibrary loan network honors requests from children on the same basis as those from adults. This means that a child who uses the smallest library unit in the state has access to the collection of the largest library. At least that is the written policy. We all know that in actual practice the theories sometimes break down, but that can be equally true in service to adults.

Exhibits, both book and non-book, are becoming recognized adjuncts to the public library program. Rural and dispersed communities may find this a difficult responsibility to carry out. In Oklahoma it has become popular to use the library as an exhibit gallery for local artists and craftsmen, involving a part of the community that might not otherwise enter the library.

Some libraries have developed interesting displays and exchanged with their neighbors. At times the Oklahoma Department of Libraries is able to offer

resources. For example, last year we provided a traveling exhibit of the juvenile books chosen for outstanding graphic excellence by the Children's Book Council, along with their catalog and the critique for each title dry-mounted on colorful backgrounds. Sample press releases and suggestions for related activities were provided as part of the "package." This made a dramatic impression in many small communities.

The expense involved with using 16mm film in library programs makes such an activity almost prohibitive for a majority of small rural community libraries. Again cooperation is the key, along with the help of Federal Funds. One of the programs developed by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries beginning in 1964 was a film library which could be made available to the developing systems throughout the state. This has made possible library film programs for children who could never have had them otherwise. It has also allowed small libraries to circulate films to their adult users who work with groups of children, and small libraries could never have found local financial support for that kind of service.

Each year sees us being involved in more interagency cooperative planning. This is to be encouraged for the diversity it adds to library related activities. One of the really exciting projects which the libraries have introduced into outlying areas of Oklahoma during the last year is the involvement drama, and this has come about through just such interagency cooperation. A group

of students with their instructors at the Oklahoma City University have been working in this field. With funds made available through the Oklahoma Arts and Humanities Council, the group can travel to any community in the state with a performance. The players and the plays are so versatile that they can adapt to almost any kind of surrounding and any number of children in the audience. A play with a circus theme was written and produced to correlate with our summer program and it has been an overwhelming success at every performance. Many children in our rural areas have not experienced "theater" and this is truly an exciting introduction for them.

The heart of library service to children is, of course, at the level of the local library, its collection of books and materials, its librarian and that librarian's dedication to the job. All the coordinated, imported or exchanged enrichments are not only ineffectual, but misleading if the local unit and its personnel can not offer the basic services. And so, much that we have spoken of to this point may be thought of as resources, training opportunities, or "spring-boards" to encourage and enrich local program, local function, and basic local assets.

Staff of even the smallest of these library service units has proved amazingly eager and innovative. Given an attractive functional building or bookmobile, a good book collection, plus a system's support and encouragement, they make

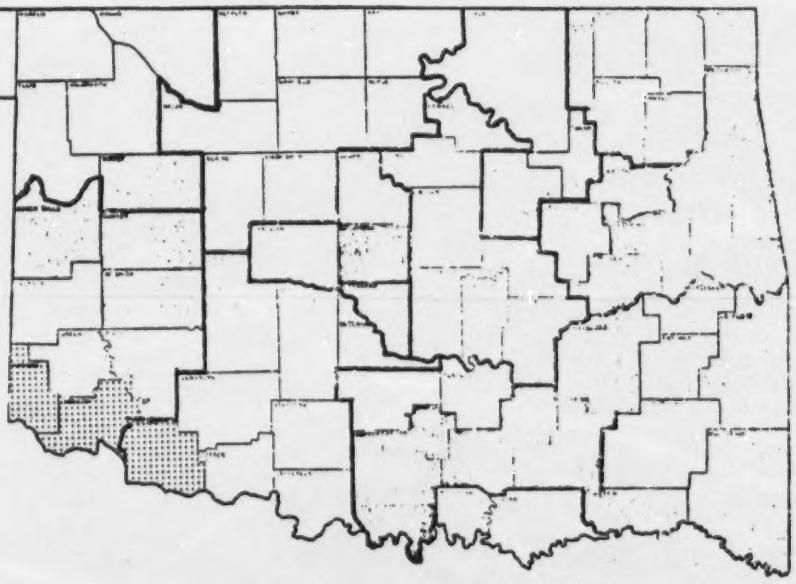
an exciting program from it. This local level is also where visits to schools are initiated and carried out, along with reciprocal visits of classes to the public library. Programs for preschool children have been widespread and popular. Children's film programs are well received and add another dimension to the concept of library service.

There has been some storytelling for older boys and girls, but this has been hampered by its demand for preparation time. Everywhere and always we stress the importance of that one-to-one function of reader's advisory service which seeks to get the right book or information to the right child at the right time.

Library service to the dispersed population of Oklahoma has made notable progress in the last few years. It still has a long way to go. We work and hope for the day when every child may have an equal opportunity for the recreational and mind stretching opportunities of good public library service.

Mary Ann Wentroth
Public Library Consultant
for Children's Services
Oklahoma Department of Libraries

PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS IN OKLAHOMA



Official Sub-State Planning Districts are outlined in black

Counties in solid color have voted library millage

Counties in broken color are in demonstration stage

Chickasaw Library System (Ardmore)
Atoka, Carter, Coal, Johnston, Love and Murray Counties

Choctaw Nation Library System (McAlester)
Choctaw, Haskell, Latimer, LeFlore, McCurtain, and Pittsburg Counties

Eastern Oklahoma District Library (Muskogee)
Adair, Cherokee, Delaware, McIntosh, Muskogee, and Sequoyah Counties

Oklahoma County Libraries (Oklahoma City)

Pioneer Multi-County Library (Norman)
Cleveland and McClain Counties

Southern Prairie Library System (Altus)
Harmon, Jackson, and Tillman Counties

Tulsa City-County Library (Tulsa)

Western Plains Library System (Clinton)
Custer, Dewey, Roger Mills, and Washita Counties

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